DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 207 409 HE 014 287

AUTHOR Smith, Calvert H.
TITLE The Predominantly Black College: An Exploration of Its Role and Function.
PUB DATE Apr 81
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Council on Black American Affairs (April 2-5, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; *Black Colleges; *Black Students; College Desegregation; *College Role; College Students; Cultural Pluralism; Educationally Disadvantaged; *Educational Opportunities; Higher Education; High Risk Students; Leadership; *School Holding Power; *Student College Relationship; Student Needs; Whites

ABSTRACT

The role of predominantly black colleges and reasons that they are needed by their constituencies are considered. It is suggested that one of the primary reasons historically black colleges have experienced enrollment and program growth is the perception of the black community about the significance of these institutions. It is claimed that the majority of black students attending predominantly white colleges are leaving before they graduate because their needs are not met by these institutions. Traditionally, predominantly black institutions have educated the spectrum of talented and untalented and have developed a capacity to provide a broad range of academic experiences to challenge each category of student, to facilitate their growth and to satisfy their educational needs. These institutions have not considered aptitude test scores as the critical variables for success in college. It is suggested that historically black colleges have the unique ability to reach the unreachable, teach the unteachable, and embrace both the rejected and the valedictorians with equal concern. It is proposed that these schools have a role to play in the education of people in society and that this role must be preserved at all costs. It is maintained that until integration and equal opportunity become realities, there is a need to strive for a culturally pluralistic society. There must be institutions available that respond to different and sometimes incompatible values and programs that are responsive to the needs of anyone who chooses to attend the institution. It is suggested that at the same time the unique mission of the black university in promoting the growth and development for black young people must be preserved. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Calvert H. Smith

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED207409

HE 014 287

THE PREDOMINANTLY BLACK COLLEGE: AN EXPLORATION OF ITS ROLE AND FUNCTION

By
Calvert H. Smith, Ph.D.
Vice Provost
University of Cincinnati

INTRODUCTION

The increasing pressures to desegregate educational institutions have resulted in questions being raised about the function of historically Black colleges and universities throughout the country. This paper, delivered by Dr. Calvert Smith on the occasion of Founder's Day at the Winston Salem State University, provides an analysis of the role of these colleges and explores the need for their continued existence.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Those of you who are historians know that the nature of the black experience and the circumstances which we as a people have faced in our struggle for survival in American society have resulted in our needing a deliverer and deliverance. We have needed deliverance from oppression, oppressive systems, and circumstances at the same time that we have needed deliverance for a better way of life.

In most instances, the deliverers have been individuals who happened to be the right person at the right time, such as W.E.B. DuBois, George Washington Carver, Booker T. Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mary McLeod Bethune, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Phillis Wheatley to name a few. The foundation upon which these and others built their messages of deliverance was generally religion and education. Historically, the church and

school have been the focal point of our struggle for existence.

Educational institutions have provided us with the practical tools we have needed to carve out a livelihood and a lifestyle. On the other hand, religious institutions have provided us with the spiritual strength, internal fortitude, and the personal commitment needed to use the skills acquired from educational institutions in productive endeavors. As a result of the influence of these two institutions, we have made viable contributions to the development of American society in spite of the dehumanizing aspect of racism, discrimination and injustices.

In traditional fashion and in response to sociological and economical circumstances with which Blacks were confronted, historically Black colleges and universities have provided young people with the skills they have needed to function productively. Through the years, these colleges and universities have experienced tremendous growth. One could easily review the progression of events that brought these institutions from their humble beginnings to full university status and conclude that such progress was possible because segregation prevented Black youngsters from attending predominantly white institutions. One could also conclude that the progressive development was characteristic of an ever changing, dynamic, quickly developing technological society. No doubt, there is an element of truth to both of these conclusions.

I submit for your consideration, however, that one of the primary reasons historically Black colleges have experienced the growth and development in programs and the expansion of their student body is the perception of the Black community about the significance of these institutions. I contend that the Black community has viewed these institutions as a means of deliverance from the degrading, dependent state of second class citizenship based on the superficial characteristic of skin-color to the proud, independent state of

productive participation in society based instead on the quality of one's character and magnitude of one's intellectual capacity.

DESEGREGATION RULING - 1954: THE IMPACT

During the last twenty years, while the predominantly Black university was experiencing tremendous growth and development, the black community and segments of the white community were pushing and negotiating for the integration of institutions and organizations in every aspect of American life. It must be remembered that just twenty-five years ago, the Brown vs. Board of Education Topeka, Kansas, 1954 desegregation case was settled whereby the concept of separate but equal was ruled unconstitutional. With this ruling, the expectations of the black community for freedom and equal access to social, economic and political processes and educational institutions were heightened.

As a result of the 1954 historic ruling, the belief emerged that the fundamental principles clearly stated in the Constitution guaranteeing equality to all would at last become a reality in the lives of every American citizen. Blacks began intensely to seek what they perceived to be better opportunities in traditional white institutions. Slowly, the overt vertiges of resistance began to disappear to the extent that a larger number of blacks gained access to institutions which had previously been denied to them. Some interesting side effects, however, were to emanate from this access.

PLIGHT OF YOUNG BLACKS IN 1978

In 1978, in spite of the fact that more blacks were attending predominantly white colleges and universities than ever before, the pushout rate for them in those institutions was 59% whereas the pushout rate for whites in the same institutions was only 43%.[1] These percentages clearly indicate that although more black students are being admitted to predominantly white

institutions, the majority of them are leaving before they graduate.

My experience in higher education indicates that most of these students do not leave because they cannot cope with the academic rigors in those settings, although some may experience some difficulties. Some others may also enroll unprepared for college work with the concomitant problem that the institution lacks the capability and/or the commitment to combat the unpreparedness.

I am convinced, however, that many black students leave predominantly white institutions because the environment is not conducive to their personal growth and development. They encounter an environment in which nobody seemingly cares and nothing fits. They are the alienated. They find an environment in which no real commitment exists to educate them, to counsel them, to empathize with them as human beings. Many black students find themselves in foreign environments in white institutions. For this reason, it is not difficult to understand that the black students who manifest various kinds of behavior in predominantly white institutions are ultimately pushed out or leave on their own volition.

When one considers the large number of black students who are being pushed out of these institutions with the fact that in our society, 38.6% of the black youth between the ages of 16-24 are unemployed, the only conclusion which one can reach is that once again the black community needs a deliverer.[2] The message is clear to me.

Young blacks are crying out for deliverance from the depths of despair and the cries result in various kinds of behavior. These young people, through their cries, are saying both to school and church institutions, "We need a way out! We need help! We need a deliverer."

Just as I am clear in my own mind about the message, I am also convinced

that universities like Morgan, Morehouse, Howard, North Carolina A&T, Texas Southern, and Winston-Salem, as examples, have the capacity to respond creatively to the cries for deliverance exploding out of the ghettos of inner cities and bellowing of the cotton and tobacco fields of the countrysides.

UNIQUE ROLE OF BLACK COLLEGES

Traditionally, predominantly black institutions have educated the spectrum of talented and untalented students. Whatever the pool of black students created by society, predominantly black institutions worked with them all. They did not just admit and educate the talented tenth. The institutions not only enrolled students in the upper third or the upper quarter of their classes, but also those students in the lower percent of their class.

Through the commitment and creativity of these institutions, they developed a capacity to provide a broad range of academic experiences to challenge each category of student, to facilitate their growth and to satisfy their educational needs.

The successes which these institutions have had in responding to the needs of black students have come irrespective of the scores they have made on Scholastic Aptitude Tests. For example, historically Black institutions have admitted freshmen with scores on the SAT of 100, 200 or more points below those accepted by predominantly white institutions. Yet, in many cases, these institutions graduate students equal or superior to graduates of white institutions.

Tuskegee Institute, for example, accepts in its veterinary medicine program students whose SAT scores are 200 or 300 points below the limit considered acceptable at white institutions specializing in veterinary medicine. Yet, until two years ago, Tuskegee graduates scored consistently higher than average

veterinary school graduates.[3]

These institutions were not concerned with what the Stanford-Binet score happened to be. They did not consider the ACT or the SAT scores as the critical variables for success in college.

Historically Black colleges accepted the challenge of not only working with students who scored 900 on the SAT but also of working with those who scored 200. In spite of students' score they were still able to provide a series of experiences for each group which facilitated academic growth.

In short, through the years, predominantly black institutions have provided the largest single source of educated black professionals in our society. In fact, virtually every important black leader in the history of the United States who has attended college at all has been a graduate of a predominantly black institution. This record cannot be denied.

Although these institutions historically have been and continue today to be troubled by unstable financial bases, relatively poor facilities, competition from white institutions for students and faculty, they continue to produce 50% of the black graduates who receive baccalaureate degrees.[4]

I do not know what these realizations mean for you, but they indicate to me that historically black colleges have the unique ability to reach the unreachable, teach the unteachable, and embrace both the rejected and the valedictorians with equal concern.

In this respect, these institutions have a calling and a role to play in the education of people in our society. I am convinced that this calling and this role must be preserved at all costs. If they are not preserved and honored, then, the cries which we hear for deliverance from the 40% of our young people who are unemployed will go unanswered. What a tradegy!

If that role and calling are not preserved, then, the cries which we hear for deliverance from the 59% of our young people who are pushed out of predominantly white colleges will go unanswered.

As I talk to educators throughout the country, I have become aware of a third group of students who are also beginning to seek an educational alternative to the predominantly white educational setting: black students who have attended predominantly white high schools and for whatever reasons, want to attend a predominantly black college. These students, in effect are saying, "we want another option."

I suggest that if we do not respond to the cries for deliverance from these three groups of students, we stand a chance of having a generation of young people who are unemployed, unprepared, uneducated, and as a result unproductive in our society.

If we do not respond to these young people, the burden of guilt and responsibility will rest on our shoulders.

I should note, at this point, that whenever I make this kind of presentation, some one invariable misunderstands what I am saying and concludes that I am a proponent for separatism of the races. I do not want you to leave with the wrong impression. Let me emphasize that I am not saying that we must or should move toward separatism based on the color of our skin. I am not saying that we must or should abandon our quest for an integrated society. I am firmly committed to making this society a haven of integration for all people. I am committed to the struggle for equal opportunity and for equality of mankind as a reality, not a dream for all time.

The fact of the matter is, however, that on this particular day, September 4, 1978, America is not the home of the free for all of its citizens. Those of us, therefore, who are responsible for raising minority youngsters in this

society, and especially those who have chosen the awesome responsibility of educating and preparing them for life, cannot afford to sacrifice their futures for personal idealogical concepts and future dreams.

I maintain that until integration and equal opportunity become realities, we must strive for a culturally pluralistic society.

Until equal educational opportunity is a reality for all people in this society, we must be sure that institutions are available in our society which provide for the expression of a multiplicity of varying and sometimes incompatible values.

Until freedom is really achieved for all people, those of us who are black educators must be sure that alternative value choices inside as well as outside of white institutions are available to all regardless of their socio-economic status, ethnic background, or skin color.

If we do not work toward this diversity for the continued access to higher education for black Americans and for the realization of the promises of America, then, I fear that it is just not going to happen.

I remind you that in 1978 in higher education, it should be noted that in reality, the Harvard's, the North Carolina University's and the University of Cincinnati's are essentially white institutions, although other ethnic groups attend.

As long as this situation exists, the Howard's, Virginia State's and the Hampton Institute's must remain essentially black, although other ethnic groups may enroll. As long as this situation persists, predominantly black institutions are not a contradiction. In fact, they are excellent representations of cultural pluralism in a culturally diverse society.

In conclusion, then, we must be sure that the programs we offer are responsive to the needs of anyone who chooses to attend our institutions.

We must be sure that the environment is conducive to each student's growth whether a valedictorian or a person last in his/her high school class. We must be sure that we do not assume the culturally arrogant position that anyone or any institution that is predominantly black is inherently inferior.

We must be sure that in providing a curriculum conducive to the academic growth of all, we do not lose the uniqueness which has made the predominantly Black university an institution which facilitates and guarantees the educational growth and development for black young people.

The historically black university is in a pivotal position. These institutions can decide that they want to continue to be responsive to the needs of black students in our society to which white institutions are not responsive, ignore the problem, or propose alternatives. The choice is ours! The reality to be faced, however, is that black students are crying for deliverance. If predominantly black institutions do not respond, then, I'm afraid that a response will not be forthcoming.

References

1. Editorial Staff, "Black Colleges," Chicago Tribune, May 21, 1978 pp. 1-2.

2. National Urban League. The State of Black America in 1978 (New York: National Urban League, 1978).

3. Editorial Staff, "Black Colleges," Chicago Tribune, May 22, 1978, pp. 1 and 4.

4. Charles Taylor, "Riding A Bicycle While Building It: Some Special Problems Facing Black Colleges in America and Their Implications for the Future," Cross Reference, May/June, 1978, Vol. I, No. 3, pp. 225-234.